Chapter 7

Developing a Systems Perspective for School Organization

Every school is unique in how it is affected by diverse factors such as the socioeconomic level of students, the experience level of the staff, the condition of the physical facilities, levels of funding from local, state, and national programs, the diversity of languages and ethnicities in the school community, and other characteristics. Even while district, state, and national policies drive many of the systems of schools (e.g., personnel, purchasing, transportation), each school shapes itself to meet the needs of the population it serves. Every school needs a unique method of organizing the work of educating its own students.

What do we need to keep in mind as we think systemically about the structure of our schools and how they operate? First, we have to recognize that in any system, one part has an impact on all the other parts – they are interdependent. Next, there are several important features of a system that, when working well together, result in high productivity (read: high achievement in schools) and greater satisfaction among the people in the system (students, staff, families, etc.). Let's look now at what several strands of research tell us about what contributes to making schools highly productive and satisfying to the people who are a part of them.

Core values: Effectively operating schools have clearly defined values – they know what is important to support their own and their stakeholders' (e.g., families, communities) success. Policies, classroom practices, and behaviors are all consistent with the core values that they have explicitly identified. Sharing and articulating a school's core values is one function of leadership.

Leadership: Schools where all students achieve have good leadership at many levels: school-wide, department, classroom, and other parts of the school. Good leaders create and sustain clear and visible values, an environment for innovation and learning, and they focus on the needs of all stakeholders in the school community. They connect to families and key community groups to address issues and concerns, and promote communication and collaboration. Leaders encourage careful planning geared toward success.

Planning: Schools and classrooms that set and meet high goals develop strong, highly-focused plans for improvement that are living documents, not something that is written and filed away on the shelf. Plans are developed collaboratively to reflect the views and needs of all groups. Classroom plans drive instruction by being aligned to state and district standards and community expectations, providing direction for the work of teachers, education support professionals, and students. In this way, all the parts of the school community have a stake in the school's success.

Stakeholder focus: Educators, students, families, and community members are all stakeholders in the education process – they all have much to gain or lose by what happens in the classroom. Achievement Gaps-closing schools and classrooms focus on developing appropriate relationships with stakeholder groups, addressing their unique needs and ensuring they have "bought into" the school's and classrooms' plans. Promoting stakeholder buy-in to the school's plan requires effective communication and management of information.

Information systems: Effective schools have systems to manage and use data and information for improvement, not just as once-a-year snapshots of testing results.

Classroom and student data are collected and analyzed to guide the teacher and students in making decisions, shaping instruction, and managing improvement efforts. Information is freely shared with students and parents in order to give them a well-rounded picture of student learning and achievement. Key decisions about staff and student development are made based on the reliable data that is collected.

Human resources: Successful schools motivate and enable educators and students to develop and realize their full potential. They maintain an environment that promotes cooperation, innovation, and excellence, supporting not only the learning needs of students but the training and development of teachers and educational support professionals. They also provide a climate that values the satisfaction and well-being of students, staff, and families. Families, students, and staff who have a say in how schools are run are generally more satisfied with their outcomes.

School and classroom procedures: Schools that support high achievement have clearly defined, well-managed procedures that are easily understood by and available to all stakeholders. Students understand and often help develop the procedures that are used in their classrooms. This increases the likelihood that the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and varying abilities are met and that the schools get the outcomes they desire.

Outcomes and results: Schools committed to excellence look at a variety of measures not just standardized tests, to determine if desired outcomes are being met. They measure all of their goals (staff professional development, student and staff satisfaction and well-being, etc.) and use the results to improve how they work. "The teacher, students, families and other key stakeholders of the classroom learning system can answer the question 'how are we doing on the things we determined are important' at any point in time." (Shipley, 2002). They can also determine if the school community's results are lining up closely with their core values.

Well-functioning systems have all these aspects working together, supporting each other, aligning with each other so a change in one reinforces a positive change in the other. Schools that seek to be successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students are most in need of making sure that these parts of the school's system work well and harmoniously. One approach to ensuring that this occurs is by developing a 'culture of continuous improvement.'

Developing a Culture of Continuous Improvement

One core value that guides highly successful systems is Continuous Improvement. In a high achieving school this core value would manifest as students and staff always asking, "how can we do better?" Schools, their staff, and students are able to continuously improve their practice and their performance because they have clear goals, they plan how to meet their goals, they assess how well they are meeting their goals, and they change what they do when they see how they could do even better.

Let's look more closely at how a culture of continuous improvement can help culturally and linguistically diverse students and their schools reach and sustain high levels of achievement. In a culture of continuous improvement:

- Mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth. There is a focus on learning from our mistakes, analyzing what happened, and taking action on what we learn.

- Understanding the cultural, language, and economic differences of the students and families who make up the school community leads to success when these factors are addressed in setting goals and planning for student success.

- Schools provide staff development to help educators change their practice to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, develop leadership skills in teachers and ESPs to take on new roles in the school, and build on the capacity of a diverse staff to bounce back and overcome obstacles.

- Leaders understand that research shows that when students and staff are happy, they actually tend to be more successful. Finding ways to tap the motivation of staff members can lead to staff well-being and satisfaction, more involved and productive students and staff, and a more successful school. Finding ways to tap the motivation of students can lead to higher achievement.

- Everyone understands that strategic planning and goal setting are critically important to the success of the entire school community.

- Classrooms are organized to help students take responsibility for their own learning. Students are involved in creating a classroom mission, and start from the first day of school to take an active role in the learning process. The classroom mission is a living document that students and teachers regularly use to guide what happens in the classroom.

Students and educators work together to PLAN how they will achieve goals, DO the work, STUDY what happened and how well they did, and ACT on what they learned, analyzing the outcome of their efforts and learning from their mistakes. There are no surprises; students understand what they are going to be learning about the outcomes and expectations for the curriculum and are actively involved in determining how they will meet those expectations. Working both independently and in teams, students take responsibility for their learning and their discipline as part of a non-threatening, non-competitive environment

with a focus on assessing growth and change.

One way to support continuous improvement is through the KEYS process, which can provide you with valuable data in improving the teaching and learning conditions in your school and classroom.

KEYS To a Quality School

In order to implement the C.A.R.E. themes, each school could consider several of the elements that research shows are essential for creating a quality school. The NEA KEYS2.0 (Keys to Excellence in Your School) research has identified six "KEYS" made up of 42 indicators of a quality school.

The six KEYS are:

Key 1: Shared Understanding and Commitment to High Goals

Key 2: Open Communication and Collaborative Problem Solving

Key 3: Continuous Assessment for Teaching and Learning

Key 4: Personal and Professional Learning

Key 5: Resources to Support Teaching and Learning

Key 6: Curriculum and Instruction

The focus of the KEYS2.0 approach, as distinguished from the strategies, described in the other chapters, is the emphasis on collective action to improve teaching and learning. While the C.A.R.E. theme chapters highlighted what individual educators might do in their respective classrooms, the following indicators, activities, and questions are intended to be considered by the entire school community, either as a whole or in small groups. In this way, the school can become organized to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students systemically and move them to their full potential as learners.

The KEYS survey instrument is a good way to identify high priority areas among the quality indicators that the school can address. When educators, students (at the high school level), parents, and community members take the KEYS survey, they receive specific information about their school community that helps them to know what are the strengths and areas in need of improvement. They can then choose to reflect, then act on those areas that they determine will help them improve.

Through several years of working with schools, we have found, however, there are a number of indicators that have critical importance for every school that is struggling to be successful. We have arranged those indicators here to align with the C.A.R.E. themes.

What follows are:

- The KEYS2.0 Indicator that aligns with the CARE themes

- What: The school elements that the indicator measures

- Why: The rationale for paying attention to these elements

- How: A suggested way to incorporate the school elements

- Questions to consider: as you move forward in dealing with this category of elements

Culture

Indicator: Teachers work closely with parents to help students learn and to improve education

What:

- Measures the level of effort school staff makes toward building trust with parents

- Looks into the working relationship between teachers and parents in under-standing and meeting the needs of students

- Measures if regular communication between the school and parents exists related to helping children learn

Why:

Trust between the school and home is essential and if it doesn't exist, it must be built. Some low-income and minority parents have had such negative experiences with school that they carry distrust with them when they bring their children to school. School personnel have a responsibility to reach out to parents on their own territory, in supportive, familiar environments. Whatever steps are taken to build trust require sensitivity to the distance—whether real or imagined—between home and school.

Ultimately the goal of parent involvement is parent empowerment. Parents' voice in how their children are educated is critical to the school's success. Family members may not initially come ready to collaborate in decisionmaking, but this is where their engagement can lead.

How:

To maximize the school's success, the management and planning teams develop a plan for involving and working with parents in the school. Another strategic opportunity may include establishing communication with:

- Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements

- District-level councils and committees for family and community involvement

- Teacher association building representatives to inform families about school board or other local elections

- Networks to link all families with parent representatives

- Neighborhood or ethnic organizations that have strong ties to the parents your school serves

Questions to Consider:

1. What can be done to establish trust and build partnerships with parents?

2. How would you communicate the need for parents to take a greater role in assisting their school in meeting student learning needs?

3. How can parents, students and other staff get involved in making decisions for their school goals?

4. What changes to current practices will be necessary to ensure a participatory process for decision making in school?

Ability

Indicator: School operates under the assumption that all students can learn

What:

- Assesses whether the school operates under the assumption that ALL students can learn regardless of parent involvement or student motivation

- Explores how instruction is tailored to individual student learning needs

- Measures the extent to which the school staff believes that success in school-related activities is due primarily to factors within a school's control

- Evaluates whether there is active involvement of all teachers in the education of students

Why:

The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher 2001 explored educator's opinions about their school environment and found that teachers in heavily minority and low-income schools generally hold lower expectations for students than teachers in high-income schools. The survey also found that there is a gap of expectations between elementary and secondary school levels.

How:

In a meeting of all the school's staff, discuss your beliefs about students' ability to learn and the kinds of expectations you have for students. Explore in small groups how your expectations may affect your behavior toward students from diverse cultures.

Questions to Consider:

1. How should instruction be tailored to meet individual student learning needs?

2. To what extent should the school focus on **how** to teach versus **what** to teach?

3. How should teachers and staff collaborate to assess student progress and determine content for professional development in their school?

4. What do teachers and educational support professionals need to know about brain-based approaches to learning for diverse students?

Resilience

Indicator: Teachers and staff collaborate to remove barriers to student learning

What:

- Appraises the extent of cooperation among teachers across grade levels, subject matter and school to solve problems affecting student learning

- Measures if teachers feel prepared to address individual student differences and use faculty meetings to collectively solve problems

Why:

Building resilience in students involves the cooperation of all staff in the school and can help students to be successful socially and academically. Communication among staff who may know the relative strengths of students can help students build on those strengths to overcome temporary setbacks.

How:

Questions to Consider:

1. What can be done to encourage educators to work together in new ways to positively affect learning for diverse students in your school?

2. How could educators prepare themselves to address individual learning styles among students in your school?

3. What resources are available to help educators to develop the protective factors of resilience in students?

Effort

Indicator: Instruction includes interventions for students who are not succeeding

What:

• Determines whether there are "avenues of access" for students coming to school with differing needs, motivations and readiness skills for learning

• Evaluates if opportunities exist for school staff to work together to find and apply alternative teaching strategies to help struggling students succeed rather than attributing their lack of success to external conditions

Why:

Student success, or lack of success, can best be understood as a result of interaction between students and the world in which they live, of which the school is a part.

Motivating students to high achievement may result from school staff creatively working together to identify alternative learning opportunities to help diverse students succeed.

How:

Form study teams to research individual needs of students. Share the research with the staff, and in small groups work on plans to make curricular and/or social modifications as needed by the study.

Questions to Consider:

1. What happens to students who are not progressing as expected academically?

2. Do teachers and other school employees assume individual and collective responsibility for helping under-achieving students progress?

3. How does an understanding of our students' culture help us motivate them to excellence?

4. How can we tell if students are making an effort when we can't see them doing it?

Systemic Change Begins with Us.

The tools of system change can lead to real transformation for students and educators. But systems don't change unless the people in them do. Michael Fullan captures a fundamental truth about systemic change and how we should approach it:

> "The starting point for what's worth fighting for is not system change, not change in others around us, but change in ourselves. This is both more achievable and paradoxically is the first step towards system change because it contributes actions, not words." (1998)

School Organization References

Fullan, Michael and Hargreaves, A. (1998). What's worth fighting for in your school? New York: Teachers College Press.

The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 2001: Key Elements of Quality Schools.

Jim Shipley, School Improvement Resource Guide: A Guide for Practitioners Using the Baldrige Approach for School Improvement and Performance Excellence (Seminole, FL: Jim Shipley and Associates, 2004).

NEA's KEYS 2.0 Initiative

What makes a quality school? In 1989, NEA researchers set out to answer that question by identifying the conditions a school needed to have in place for students to achieve at the highest levels. The result of this ground-breaking research is the KEYS2.0 Initiative. Short for Keys to Excellence for Your Schools, KEYS is:

- A survey tool that lets schools measure for themselves the extent to which the quality indicators are present
- A process that brings educators, parents and the community together to improve their local schools.

Across the nation, schools are using NEA's KEYS2.0 program to put themselves on the road to quality and ultimately to improve student achievement. To learn more about the KEYS2.0 Initiative and to see a demo of the survey, visit www.keysonline.org.

Activities for School Organization

Topic	Activity
Culture of continuous improvement	1. Using an Affinity Process To Develop a Mission Statement, page 7-7 2. The Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle, page 7-9
Stakeholder focus	3. Student Climate Survey, page 7-11

A+ Activity #1
Using an Affinity Process To Develop a Mission Statement

Developing a classroom mission statement helps to create a focus for students' learning goals and objectives. The activity on page 7-8 helps to ensure that the diverse views of all your students are honored.

The basic elements of this process could also be used to create a school mission statement as well.

A+ Using an Affinity Process To Develop a Mission Statement

Tool Time

1. Post the questions on chart paper, one question per chart:

   • Why are we here? What do we have to do well together? How will we make it happen?

   OR

   • The mission of our class is to DO WHAT? FOR WHOM? HOW?

2. Individually and silently record single responses to each of the questions on a single "Post-it" note. It is perfectly acceptable to tackle one question at a time.

3. Post all notes on the chart paper or bulletin board.

4. Take turns grouping similar responses together.

5. When all students are satisfied with the groupings, label the group of notes. Reach agreement that the labels reflect the key ideas of the class. Use the group labels as the elements of the class mission statement.

DO What?

DO What?

Be good readers   Think   Be good writers

The mission of Mr. Smith's class is to be the best readers, thinkers, and writers that we can be by working and learning together.

Mr. Smith's 5th Grade Class

Just a reminder...

• The **process** of teachers and students working together to compose a statement of mission or purpose is more important than the final product.

• Mission statements define a **constancy of purpose** for teachers, students, parents, and other key stakeholders of the classroom learning system.

• **Short, sweet, and memorable** is better than long, jargon-filled, and forgettable.

A+ Activity #2
The Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle

What is continuous improvement? The activity on page 7-10 walks you through the basic steps for keeping track of what you are doing and changing your behavior as you go along to move closer and closer to success. Familiarizing culturally and linguistically diverse students with this process has the potential to empower them to halt a failure cycle before it becomes a habit.

A+ Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle

STUDY

1. Assist students in analyzing their personal performance toward the learning standards and class/course/program goals.

Show the learner where he or she is performing and where he or she needs to be.

PLAN

2. Work with students to develop personal learning goals aligned to class/course/program goals–at least one learning goal per student.

Help the learner set a short-term target for getting closer to where he or she needs to be.

3. Assist students in determining how they will measure their progress on a regular (weekly or monthly) basis.

Show the learner how a quiz score, project grade, or rubric score is a sign of his or her learning performance.

4. Provide students with a template for graphing their progress on a weekly or monthly basis.

Give the learner graph paper and teach him or her how to chart their score or grade.

5. Provide students with a template for personal action planning for how they will work toward their goal(s).

Give the learner an action plan form, and teach them how to describe what they're going to do to improve.

DO

Let them 'do' their plan!

STUDY

6. Establish a regular time and process for students to review their personal goals and update their data folders based on new levels of performance.

Make data analysis a regular part of the classroom schedule.

7. Provide parents with a way to document their review of their student's performance.

Teach parents how to look at their student's learning results.

ACT

8. Establish a regular time for students to develop new action plans based on new levels of performance.

Make action planning a regular part of the classroom schedule.

Let them 'do' their plan!

A+ Activity #3
Student Climate Survey

There are many surveys available for gauging "customer satisfaction" – how students feel about their daily experiences in school. The survey on page 7-12 was developed by teachers in Pinellas County, Florida, as a simple way to periodically monitor their classroom atmosphere. The data are used by the teacher to make improvements or address classroom issues – they are not reported or shared with anyone else.

You can adapt the language to reflect the reading level of your students. Develop survey questions that will provide you with the information you need in order to improve your classroom.

This survey could be adapted for use with parents to gather data on how they feel about their connection to your classroom.

Lesson Preparation

Grades: 3 -12
Duration: 10 -15 minutes
Grouping: Individual
Materials: Student Climate Survey (page 7-12)
Objective: To obtain feedback from students in order to make improvements in classroom climate and processes

Lesson Delivery

1. Distribute surveys to students. They should not write their names on these.

2. Ask students to answer each question based on how they feel about the classroom environment.

3. Encourage students to provide specifics about any problem areas in order to help you make improvements.

4. Assure students that the surveys are confidential.

5. Have a student collect all of the surveys for you to review after class ends.

Debriefing

1. Use the survey results to help improve your classroom environment.

2. Let students know if there are concerns they have raised that you cannot address.

3. Let students know how you plan to use their feedback.

4. Determine how often you will survey students in order to have useful data – once each semester? Once each grading period? Other?

5. Remember – these are data that can help you in developing a culture of continuous improvement.

A+ Student Climate Survey

Please complete the following survey by circling the response that best expresses your feelings about this class:

The teacher treats me with respect.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I am proud of my work.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I feel the teacher wants me to be successful in this class.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I feel the teacher wants my opinion.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I think the class works to achieve our mission.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I am encouraged to be creative and think for myself.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I think my teacher is helpful to me.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

There is a system in place to help me understand and complete my assignments.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I set goals for myself to help me achieve at my highest level.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

I keep data about my progress and improvement.

strongly agree   agree   not sure   disagree   strongly disagree

Comments:

NEA also provides several surveys for members and local associations to use as tools to improve school climate, staff development, safety, and other areas. The OPSCAN Surveys Program must be requested through your local or state NEA affiliate and is available at no charge. It provides pre-packaged surveys on optical scan forms which are processed at NEA, with results provided within three weeks after the forms are received by NEA Research. Contact your local Association office for more information on the OPSCAN Surveys Program.

OPSCAN Surveys Program

This list briefly describes the surveys that schools will find most useful in addressing school organization issues:

- School culture survey: to assess the conditions (culture) of school operations and activities

- School restructuring survey: to assess school programs and resources in areas related to school reform

- Technology issues survey: to provide information in the general area of technology issues and schools

- Professional development issues: to obtain information about the experiences, needs and interests of members pertaining to professional development and training

- School safety and student discipline: to obtain information about issues impacting safety in schools and potential ways to help ensure student discipline

- Staff satisfaction survey: to obtain information about issues impacting job and workplace satisfaction

- Parent and community involvement in schools: to help local Associations assess levels of involvement, satisfaction, and expectations in schools